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The extent to which practitioner inquiry groups function as democratic learning communities depends largely on how a facilitator negotiates the group's power relationships and politics.

Negotiating Power and Politics in Practitioner Inquiry Communities

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For nearly a decade, the field of adult literacy education has been exploring the potential of practitioner inquiry staff development, a form of teacher research, for producing knowledge and improving service to learners. Practitioner inquiry groups are organized as learning communities. Group members, who generally are classroom teachers and program administrators, come together over time to collaborate on practice-based problems. The idea is for practitioners to reflect critically together on their practice, engage in meaningful dialogue with one another, conduct systematic inquiries into practice, and in some cases even take collective action that will effect change in classrooms, programs, or policies (Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh, 1993; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 1993; Lytle, Belzer, and Reumann, 1992). At the core of the practitioner inquiry movement are democratic beliefs that teachers, program administrators, and other practitioners should have a significant voice in determining how the work of literacy education is carried out. Moreover, they have an ethical role to play in efforts toward a more just society.

As a facilitator, I have often felt discontinuity between my democratic aims and the reality of inquiry groups. For example:

- I want these learning communities to be inclusive of all members, yet it is not a given that people will be respected for who they are and what they believe simply because they have a common purpose.
- Although I may be able to encourage conversations that are “reflective,” it is much more difficult to promote dialogue that is “critical.”

- Although I try to promote collaboration and collegiality, group members may prefer to pursue their learning individually.
- Although I want inquiry communities to be places where participants can pursue the questions about practice that intrigue them most, it is often apparent that teachers' supervisors are establishing from the sidelines questions that can and cannot be pursued.
- There is often tension between a group's desire for a high level of direction from me, and my desire for the group to claim its own authority.

In essence, my experiences have not always matched the images of inquiry groups that originally inspired me, such as this one offered by Lytle (1996):

All involved seem to be seeking to alter aspects of the existing structures and power relationships. . . . In forming and building the inquiry community, participants took a critical stance. They questioned common practice, deliberated about what they regarded as expert knowledge, examined underlying assumptions, and attempted to unpack the arrangements and structures of adult literacy education to understand their sources and impacts. In addition, each of their individual projects had the potential to stimulate some form of change, first through its implementation and dissemination on site and second through the seminar as a collaborative community. The participants' collective work suggests that these kinds of practitioner inquiry communities regard educational problems and issues not solely as individual matters but also as social, cultural, and political concerns that may require collective action. [pp. 92–93]

Vivid depictions such as this were the inspiration behind many recent efforts to organize learning communities for practitioner inquiry in the United States. However, they were not able to make the effort any easier because they are constructed as if the material realities of the world are not being played out. In many respects, these accounts *suggest* an evenness of habit and mind, a homogeneity, and a balance of power not typically reflected in groups. Moreover, the facilitator is invisible; critical reflection, dialogue, and action just seem to happen. In a more realistic depiction, facilitators would be central in the effort to democratize knowledge production in inquiry groups, yet they would struggle to do so in the cross-currents of internally and externally based power dynamics.

It was out of my own struggles as a facilitator enacting democratic practice and my desire to understand those struggles better that I set out to talk with other inquiry group facilitators about their experiences. The remainder of this chapter draws not only on the literature but also on interviews with women who facilitate adult literacy practitioner inquiry communities in the United States (Drennon, 2000). It focuses on the intersection of practice,

ethical aims, and power relationships to explain why practitioner inquiry communities are never the wholly democratic learning communities we wish them to be. The point in demystifying practitioner inquiry communities is not to discredit the inquiry movement. On the contrary, by understanding how it is that the usual practices we engage in as facilitators become sites of struggle, choices reveal themselves to us. Practitioner inquiry groups, like other learning communities, will never wholly achieve our democratic ideals, but they *can* be more democratic. Naming the challenges that facilitators encounter in the struggle for democracy is an essential step toward negotiating the possibilities of these learning communities with greater acumen.

Power and Politics in Practitioner Inquiry Groups

Facilitation of practitioner inquiry groups involves at least three broad categories of practice. First, facilitators are central in developing and sustaining the group as a learning community. Toward this end, they might recruit group members, see to it that meeting agendas are planned and carried out, and promote an ethos of collaboration, collegiality, and shared purpose in the group. Second, facilitators take the lead in facilitating learning in the group. They help participants raise practice-based concerns, structure opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue, assist participants in the framing of research questions, and support group members as they collect, analyze, and report on data. Third, facilitators of inquiry groups are almost always involved in the effort to advance the status of inquiry and practitioner knowledge in programs and the profession. Thus, they might guide group members through the process of writing up research for publication or help them plan and organize presentations for conferences or other staff development events.

Facilitators can experience virtually any day-to-day practice as a site of struggle—that is, a moment in time when the group’s democratic impulse is somehow thwarted. A key reason why day-to-day practices become sites of struggle is that power relationships and politics play out inside as well as outside the boundaries of inquiry groups.

Power and Politics Inside the Group. To say that asymmetrical relations of power are pervasive in inquiry groups is to say that individuals are always ranked in relation to one another—as they are in the larger society—hierarchically. In a hierarchy based on socially structured power, relationships are based on characteristics that individuals are generally born with or born into. These include race, class, gender, sexuality, regionality, able-bodiedness, and other identity categories. A hierarchy of organizationally structured power relationships is also present in inquiry groups. In this sense, relationships are based on role status. For example, because the facilitator is the group leader, there is an asymmetrical power relationship between her and the rest of the group. There is also unequal power

inherent in the relationship between teachers and program administrators who may work together as members of the same inquiry group, or between full-time teachers and those who only work part-time. The category of organizationally structured power also refers to the status of an inquiry group in a larger educational system. Actually, hierarchies are not exclusive of one another. Those people granted the most privilege in society by virtue of race, class, and gender, for instance, have often been the same ones to achieve greater organizational status. Arguably, knowledge and skill are socially distributed as well. Moreover, the personality traits, habits, and attitudes that privilege some members of an inquiry group, place some at a disadvantage, and render others a liability generally reflect dominant cultural values and norms that have continually been legitimated by society or institutions.

Power and Politics Outside the Group. An educational system can support practitioner inquiry as individual professional development and yet actually challenge the democratic aims of inquiry by being at odds with its critical perspective and orientation toward change. Foucault (1980) defined *regime of truth* as “the types of discourse that society accepts and makes function as true” (p. 131). A regime of truth operates in educational organizations through regulatory and stabilizing functions. Popkewitz (1987) explains, “They shape and fashion what can be said and what must be left unsaid, the types of discourse accepted as true and the mechanisms that make it possible to distinguish between truth and error” (pp. 4–5). It is not surprising that many organizations will not support practitioners’ critical examination of their own policies. Group members who have internalized the regime of truth support the organization’s power by opting for “safe” inquiry projects that will not disrupt the status quo.

Organizations’ structures can also constrain a group’s democratic agenda from the outside. Organizations may limit the time that practitioners are able to engage with classroom research or with colleagues in a group setting. They can also limit or deny the structured opportunities for practitioners to extend their knowledge to wider audiences. The pressure to produce reports, which can readily shift a group’s emphasis from process to end product, is another mechanism through which educational systems constrain a group’s democratic impulse.

Democratic staff development has little chance of thriving unless larger educational institutions express a commitment to democratic culture (Gore, 1998; Gore and Zeichner, 1995; Kemmis, 1993; Noffke, 1992, 1997). Facilitators, however, can get mixed messages from the larger educational organizations that ostensibly support inquiry. Moreover, they may see themselves as generally unable to effect changes on the organizational level when they are very much a part of, and dependent on, the “system” that practitioner inquiry potentially seeks to alter. Although organizations may provide funding, they are often structured in ways that work against the level of engagement that practitioner inquiry requires. Despite a facilitator’s

commitment to democratic principles of practitioner inquiry, she may feel obligated to negotiate the competing and sometimes contradictory interests of the state—her employer.

Negotiating Power Issues and Politics

There are at least three significant power issues that facilitators encounter in practitioner inquiry communities. First, they often struggle with their own identity as it is either socially or organizationally constructed. When this happens the questions become these: What does it mean to be an authority in a democratic culture? Or what does it mean to be white or African American or young or a lesbian in this group? Second, facilitators struggle with the identity of the group itself. The question becomes: What does it mean for this group to be an inquiry group and not something else? Third, facilitators struggle with the identity of practitioner inquiry as a movement. This leads to such questions as these: What does it mean to advance practitioners' knowledge in the larger field? And what kind of knowledge and whose knowledge is it that we advance or not, and for what reasons? The questions arise because of competing interests brought to bear on democratic aims in a given scenario. To resolve the questions, the facilitator needs to exercise power through the negotiation of her own and others' interests.

An analytical framework developed by Cervero and Wilson (1994, 1998) offers a way to understand how social and organizational power relationships operate through day-to-day practices in practitioner inquiry communities. Cervero and Wilson assert that educators negotiate *with* and *among* personal, social, and organizational interests to achieve their practical purposes and the democratic aims associated with them. In this sense, facilitating practitioner inquiry is always a political process. They conceive of negotiation as the central mechanism of power because of the term's political connotation. Negotiation, they explain, is "a process by which people confer, discuss, and bargain in order to reach agreement about what to do in relation to the educational program" (p. 6). Their framework also takes into account negotiation at a more fundamental level where educators negotiate simultaneously *about* interests and power relationships of stakeholders.

In practitioner inquiry, there is a surface level of negotiation where facilitators go about getting things done in a practical sense while guided by democratic aims. Cervero and Wilson refer to negotiations on this surface level as *substantive negotiations* because they are about the substance of the practitioner inquiry program—the activities, the methods, and the practical outcomes that are desired. In substantive negotiations, facilitators act *within* the web of power relationships. There is also a process of negotiation occurring simultaneously on a deeper level *about* issues of power. These issues are fundamentally about social and organizational identity, the group

identity, or the public identity of practitioner inquiry. Cervero and Wilson refer to negotiations occurring simultaneously on this deeper level as *metanegotiations*. It is on this level that facilitators *act on* power relations themselves, either changing them or reinforcing them. Metanegotiations, according to Cervero and Wilson, directly influence substantive negotiations. Applying this framework to the struggle facilitators experience brings some clarity to what is easily obscured through the chaos and noise of everyday practice. When facilitators negotiate among competing interests to achieve their practical and democratic aims, they are, at the same time, negotiating about competing interests and about power relationships. Through this negotiation, power relationships are effectively reproduced or transformed. Another way of explaining situations is to say that the way a facilitator negotiates the power issues she encounters in practitioner inquiry has a direct bearing on the achievement of her practical and democratic aims.

The Politics of Being Known: Negotiating Social and Organizational Identity. A facilitator's capacity to act is constructed *within* situations and *through* group relationships. She has no single identity and does not speak in a single voice. Maher and Tetreault (1996) discuss identity politics as a negotiation among "dominated and exploited groups trying to understand who they are." This involves a "struggle against the barriers between them and other groups that these same identities create" (p. 156).

Rocco and West (1998) use the term *polyrhythmic realities* to refer to "how a person can be privileged by one characteristic and at the same time not be privileged by virtue of another" (p. 173). It goes without saying that facilitators occupy a privileged position in the hierarchy of organizationally structured power relations; they are the leaders. However, in spite of leadership status, facilitators may, in relation to others, be lower-rung occupants in the social hierarchy based on identity characteristics including race, class, sexuality, geographical identity, physical attributes, or age.

Feminist poststructural theories highlight this idea of "constantly shifting identity" (Tisdell, 1998) and posit that the connection between one's identity and social structures affects positionality in learning environments. Positionality, essentially, was what an African American facilitator was referring to when she said about facilitating groups, "Your gender and your color and your social status matter. They matter big-time." The concept refers to the idea that a group member is marginal only in relation to another. Poststructural theorists argue that the capacity for agency can be enhanced if teachers and learners explore the intersection of identity and social structure rather than ignore it, because this intersection shapes the construction of knowledge (Maher and Tetreault, 1997). A lesbian facilitator with whom I spoke explained precisely how this occurs:

So, if I'm working with lesbians and there seems to be some feminist consciousness then I assume that we have a shared body of reading, a shared

background, a shared way of deconstructing power structures or thinking about literary allusions or whatever in our work. When that's not there, you're not sure whether to count on it or not. I'd like to say that I bring [a lesbian feminist perspective into the group] but I don't know if I could really come up with ten examples. I mean, I think I might allude to it or try to bring in a quote or make some reference but it's. . . . I'm more conscious that this is not going to ring any familiar bells. This is going to be something that might feel a little unfamiliar to people or like a stretch or something like that. . . . I just use. . . . a more generic teaching-learning, sort of the things that carry currency in the field around learner-centered practice that I assume here [in this city] that people have some working knowledge of.

This facilitator is explaining how her power is contextual as well as relational. Using "generic" strategies that fail to acknowledge difference shapes the construction of knowledge in the group. She chooses to maintain the status quo or the illusion that people are all the same even though, in principle, she supports the democratic principle of engaging diverse perspectives. Similarly, an African American facilitator described how she is comfortable engaging a group in social critique based on race when she is working with other African Americans. But when working with white teachers she is not sure how she will be perceived with regard to race issues and therefore does not address them. Clinchy (1996) has said, "Both separate and connected knowing achieve their full power when practiced in partnership with other like-minded knowers" (p. 233). When facilitators feel they are working with like-minded individuals they are more inclined to engage them in critical examination of the social, cultural, and political context of literacy and learning. But this raises concerns about what happens in groups where learners are socially different.

Power dynamics in a group are constructed out of race, class, gender, regionality, and other identity categories. One facilitator, for instance, described wanting to "protect" a group member who was significantly younger than the rest of the group and then "bombing" at an activity. She acted on the situation by intervening more assertively than she might have if the struggling participant were older. "The youngness added to my sense of her vulnerability," she explained. In another group, class-based differences between one participant and the rest left the facilitator feeling that the minority group member was not "right" for practitioner inquiry. Again the concept of positionality offers a way of viewing the relational significance of identity. Tisdell (1998) notes that positionality has remained relatively unexamined in adult education literature, and this discussion supports the call for further investigation into the topic.

The Politics of Creating Knowledge: Negotiating Group Identity. Facilitators continually negotiate with group members and other stakeholders an understanding of what inquiry groups are about. Practitioner inquiry is a relatively new idea in adult literacy education.

Because the groups are in an unfamiliar situation, the process of negotiating a working consensus of what is to go on is perhaps more visible than it might be in other social arenas that practitioners function in, such as training sessions or staff meetings. Sociologists explain why this is so. "The negotiation process becomes apparent in situations that are less familiar and routine. On those occasions people are likely to be more aware of the potential gap between the private and projected definitions of various participants" (O'Brien and Kollock, 1997, p. 67).

Facilitators locate many of their struggles in participants' resistance to accepting the new norms and culture of the inquiry group. It may be that facilitators are especially concerned with maintaining the boundaries and their definition of an inquiry group because of the pressures that serve to undermine them. That is, the norms they struggle to foster are contrary to the norms that many teachers are socialized into. This is a theme that has been explored by a number of researchers interested in how the culture and norms of schooling, particularly those associated with teacher privacy and autonomy, work against the aims of teacher research (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1992; Holly, 1987; Little, 1990). It goes without saying that educational organizations are better established as social-cultural systems than inquiry groups. Facilitators play a central role in defining and sustaining the alternative system and this may explain, in part, the pressure they exert when it comes to encouraging the group to go about its business in very particular ways. Gore and Zeichner (1995), who have examined the strategies through which power is wielded in education, suggest that this boundary work is itself a form of power that has the effect of "integrating or normalizing all [practitioners] into a rather singular notion of what counts" (p. 208). They urge educators to be aware of the normalizing effects of boundary work.

The Politics of Being Knowers: Negotiating the Public Identity of Practitioner Inquiry. Power issues in this category speak to different but related questions. Who is really listening to what practitioner researchers have to say? From the perspective of facilitators, what do we want them to hear? What does the wider public expect to hear from us, and what are the implications of this expectation? These questions force facilitators to wonder also about their role in shaping the content and quality of written research reports. Facilitators are dismayed when there seems to be no real audience for written reports or public presentations about field-generated research. Facilitators are motivated by how they think organizations will react to the process and outcomes of practitioner inquiry because they rely on them for continued funding. Negotiating the public identity of practitioner inquiry is in this sense closely tied to the issue of negotiating the group identity, because what goes on in the group is ultimately conveyed to outsiders. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1998) suggest power issues associated with the public identity of practitioner inquiry when they write: "The

growth of the teacher research movement hinges on a paradox: as it is used in the service of more and more agendas and even institutionalized in certain contexts, it is in danger of becoming anything and everything. As we know, however, anything and everything often lead in the end to nothing of consequence or power. It would be unfortunate indeed if the generative nature of teacher research contributed to either its marginalization and trivialization, on the one hand, or its subtle co-optation or colonization, on the other" (p. 21).

Facilitators want to ward off the threat of trivialization as well as co-optation, and this is why maintaining the boundaries and definition of the group on the one hand becomes just as important as extending the group's knowledge to wider audiences on the other. "The point," write Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1998), "is not to determine whether teacher research 'counts' but what it counts for, not whether it is 'interesting,' but whose interests it serves" (p. 33). Facilitators' stories of struggle in negotiating the public identity of practitioner inquiry shed light on the ways that real facilitators in real settings are attempting to answer this question and reconciling that effort with a democratic vision.

Rather than viewing their struggles as chaos and competing interests as just "noise," facilitators may benefit from recognizing that recurring patterns in their experience are rooted in socially and organizationally structured power relationships. Moreover, facilitators may be empowered through an understanding of their actions as political strategies and tactics that have a bearing, one way or another, on power relationships as well as democratic aims.

Conclusion

It is important that we emphasize the strategic contribution of facilitators—their strategies and tactics, as well as the consequences of their efforts—for democratic education. The fact that democracy is packed with *inherent* tensions and outright contradictions cannot be overemphasized. There is a contradiction, for instance, in the desire both to lead the group and yet to take the focus away from oneself as leader. There is an ongoing tension between the authority practitioners are given to chart the course of their own inquiry and the authority facilitators are given to stimulate a practitioner's further development and change. Facilitators cope with a persistent tension between serving the needs of the inquiry group and responding to the demands of host organizations and funding agencies. Negotiating the tensions and contradictions inherent in democratic education will always be part and parcel of the effort to enact democratic ideals in practitioner inquiry communities. These ideals can never be completely achieved, but they *can* be furthered. Practitioner inquiry facilitators can choose practices that are more democratic than others and they can continually examine the

direction and effects of routine practices, power issues, and the political responses to power that different actors employ. Given the contradictions and ironies inherent in democratic practice, facilitators can develop their own healthy skepticism about the aims they seek to achieve and interrogate all practices for their effect on individuals and groups.

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